Fall 1992

Review of "Professors at Play"

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The following review was originally published in *The Midwest Quarterly* 34/1 (Autumn 1992): 138-141.

Robert Wexelblatt, *Professors at Play* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

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Professor Wexelblatt says the finest compliment he has received as a writer came when a college administrator said, "Wexelblatt shouldn't be let loose behind a typewriter" (156). The seventeen essays in this volume—six of which have appeared in this journal—bear out the compliment. They are entertaining and insightful. The essays, however, lack a central focus: a more accurate title would have been "Thoughts on Random Things, with Special Emphasis on Kafka."

Wexelblatt should no more be let loose behind a typewriter than in front of a classroom. Students might begin to think. Those familiar with the modern academy realize that effective teaching meets with resistance from both professors and students. A sign of prestige in a university is the extent to which faculty are unavailable to students [139] (99). He is also aware of student attitudes. An undergraduate complained, "It is useless to talk to [Professor X] about the material when you haven't read any of it" (35). Wexelblatt adopts a Socratic approach to these obstacles. He reminds educators that wisdom cannot be measured by the law of supply and demand (71), and he attempts to show the way out of the cave where developing character is confused with acquiring possessions (59).

In the tradition of Plato's *Symposium*, Wexelblatt plays with erotic metaphors for teaching—courtship, affair, seduction, and orgasm, and their counterfeits, rape and masturbation (12). He teases students by lecturing as if he were Oscar Wilde (76-87), cajoles them by demonstrating that they often prefer ersatz writing to authentic literature (20), and woos them by finding the Platonism implicit in the literature of Tolstoy and Kafka, and the architecture of Le Corbusier and Rohe (90-95). One of his most successful conquests involved using an Epicurean hedonistic calculus to convince a student that he could attend more parties if he studied during the week and partied on weekends than if he partied every night and flunked out of school (54).

Wexelblatt's busy mind can find something interesting to say about the most mundane things. Consider the subject of complaining: "Some complaints, aesthetically speaking, really are better than others" (28). The hierarchy of complaints is encoded in language. On a descending scale of dignity there are laments, jeremiads, groans, whines, and bellyaches. Wexelblatt avers that the value of a complaint is not simply a function of the nobility of its object. Here is my

example. Most complaints about restaurant food never rise above the level of Goldilocks; the food is too hot or too cold. But Woody Allen is truly imaginative: “the food is lousy and the portions are too small.”

Another unlikely topic on which Wexelblatt has interesting things to say is telephones. The imperative, “You must answer a ringing phone” is categorical (108)—Immanuel Kant notwithstanding. I was reminded of Macon and his siblings in Anne Tyler’s *The Accidental Tourist*. They decide not to answer their phone. Yet, when it rings, they have what amounts to an ethical discussion on whether they should answer it. Wexelblatt says that a metropolitan phone directory is an ethical document insofar as it shows who has signed the social contract (109). The imperative to answer ringing phones is so compelling that it supersedes other ethical demands. Ordinarily the unspoken rule is “first come, first served.” But who has not encountered clerks who pay more attention to ringing phones than to customers in the store on whom they are waiting?

[140] Wexelblatt periodically turns to the problem of freedom. He is anxious about the threat to freedom posed by deterministic systems. Twice he quotes Eric Heller’s comment on Oswald Spengler’s determinism: correct, but untrue (71, 216). “Freedom to choose,” he says, “disrupts all the disciplines” (111). The characters he uses to exemplify freedom are the “unintelligible heroes” of existentialism and its spiritual kin—Bartleby, Illych, Samsa, and Meursault. Their freedom, in practical terms, is the freedom to choose unhappiness. He also portrays the real-life Kleist, Kierkegaard, and Kafka as men who sacrificed the duty to marry for the tortured life of the solitary writer (176-185). I am more convinced by Heloise’s case against marriage to Abelard, if only because her arguments are less obviously full of rationalizations and the fear of commitment.

Wexelblatt’s reflections on freedom cry out for refinement. Undiluted determinism is indeed the antithesis of freedom. In this sense, Jules Lequyer [also, Lequier], a little-known French philosopher, was correct when he said that the only thing comprehensible about freedom is that it is incomprehensible. But when William James, who had read Lequyer, wrote, “My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will,” he made the first step toward recovering from depression, aided in large measure by his happy marriage to Alice Gibbens. Could Kleist et al have learned nothing from this more healthy-minded attitude?

Wexelblatt hints at the idea of freedom in his discussion of literary analogues of creation *ex nihilo* (130-141). Writers are somewhat like God, creating new worlds in their opening lines. “Only plagiarists write fictions without creating” (135). The analogy is more exact than the author sees. The bane of traditional theology was that creation *ex nihilo* places freedom in the hands of the creator at the expense of the created.

Here again, Lequyer is helpful. Like Wexelblatt, he associated creation with beginnings. However, he understood freedom as a form of creativity shared by God and the creatures. His insight is captured in his exclamation, "God, who created me creator of myself." Lequyer carried the thought to its logical denouement: by our decisions we create something new in God.

These ideas are not without their champions in literature. John Fowles says that any created world, including a literary one, must be independent of its creator. The novelist, accordingly, should conform to the definition of God as "the freedom that allows other freedoms to exist" (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*, chapter 13). Neither determinism nor creation *ex nihilo* are true (Wexelblatt comes close to seeing the false dilemma in the essay "Between [141] Recurrence and Invention"). Creative acts conditioning other creative acts is the overlooked alternative.

These remarks would be out of place were the book concerned only with lighthearted amusement, as the title suggests. But I suspect that the author is referring to himself when he speaks of "a skeptical mind with a strongly religious bent" (234). In any event, readers will be both amused and edified by Wexelblatt's meanderings.